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The Fidelity Files

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Extract

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Changing Channels

THE MAN I was looking for was seated comfortably in the back of the hotel bar.

Dark hair, dark suit, tie loosened, top button unbuttoned. He sat alone in a plush, red velvet booth with his left arm casually sprawled out over the top. His fingers gently drummed against the fabric to the beat of the soft lounge music while his other hand methodically brought his nightcap to his mouth for another sip.

I observed him, unseen, from the archway that led into the hotel's lobby.

He was looking for something. Not anything in particular. But something worth distracting him. At least for the night.

I continued to watch as his eyes adeptly found the only other female presence in the bar. He examined her from across the room, and upon taking in her high-rise slacks and unflatteringly conservative turtleneck, looked away, discouraged, and took another sip of his drink.

And that, right there, was my cue.

I brushed a loose strand of hair away from my eyes and walked into the bar, making certain to move slowly enough so that his eyes could catch me. But with the combination of his wandering eye and the observable shortage of customers tonight, it wasn't a difficult task.

Some nights are just easier than others.

They usually start with the legs. Most guys are Leg Men. It's a fact. Two years ago I would have guessed that the male population was *equally* divided into thirds: Leg Men, Butt Men, and Breast Men. Or what I call "the Holy Male Trinity." But now I know the truth: Most men like legs. Although I usually bring three different

outfits, just in case. Each complementing one, and only one, of the three features associated with the trinity. But I always start with the legs. It's a safe bet.

Tonight it was a black suit miniskirt with strappy black Manolos . . . no nylons. I call it the "corporate slut" look. It's corporate enough to make them take you seriously and slutty enough for them to know you like being noticed.

For me, it's not about *liking* being noticed. It's my job for them to notice me. And even though some might choose to criticize me on this point, the way I see it, I'm just doing my job.

Whether or not this particular one was a Leg Man became irrelevant as soon as his eyes wandered up from my ankles, over my thighs, and to the elevated hemline of my skirt. Of course, he didn't stop there . . . they rarely do. Only after they reach the hemline, they can no longer rely on their eyes; it's all imagination from there on up.

I passed his booth, acting completely oblivious to his attention, and made my way to the bar, where I slid casually onto one of the high-backed stools.

"Grey Goose vodka gimlet, please."

The bartender, content to finally have something to do on an empty Wednesday night besides shine martini glasses, nodded cordially and placed a cocktail napkin down in front of me before turning to prepare my drink.

With a tired sigh I cupped my chin in the palm of my hand and rested my elbow on the wood-paneled bar. The movement was intended to make me look bored. Long day, long trip, *long,* lonely night ahead of me.

It worked.

As the bartender placed my drink down on the cocktail napkin and I reached for my wallet, out of the corner of my eye I saw a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill slide onto the bar. "Here, let me get that for you," a male voice offered.

I looked up to see the man from the booth standing next to me. I appeared slightly startled by his presence. Why wouldn't I be? It's not like I was *expecting* him to come over.

"That's so nice of you," I said gratefully.

A sly smile appeared across his lips. "My pleasure."

*

I WAS here because of a phone call I had received approximately one week earlier. The woman on the other end needed my help.

Everyone who calls that specific number needs my help. That is, after all, why I have the number.

I agreed to meet with her the next morning.

"I'll come to you," I said, offering the same comforting reassurance I give to everyone who calls that number.

I sat in her large, elegantly decorated living room and listened to her story. It was a familiar one; I'd heard it at least two hundred times. Sometimes with slight variations, sometimes nearly word for word.

But always with the same core motivator: fear.

"The maid found this in my husband's pants pocket while she was doing laundry." She reached onto the nearby coffee table and picked up a small, crinkled piece of paper. She looked at it pensively, hoping that maybe if she read it for the hundred and second time it might say something else. Or maybe a new and better explanation would finally come to mind and she could send me home.

No such luck.

She reluctantly handed me the piece of paper with a despondent sigh, and wiped her nose with a crumpled, overused Kleenex. "I'm sorry, I'm such a mess. I just can't believe I'm doing this."

I looked down at the handwritten note and nodded understandingly. "Well, you did the right thing by calling me. It's best to know for sure than to always wonder, right?"

She stared at me with uncertainty. "I guess."

"It is," I assured her. "Trust me."

I had assured many women of the exact same thing. Sometimes, when you're in their shoes, it's not always easy to see. Or better yet, it's not always the way you *want* to see it. The heart and the mind are legendary for disagreeing on subjects like this.

"What do you think it means?" she asked me, nodding toward the small, creased paper in my hand.

I looked down at it again, running my fingertip over the black ink. "It's hard to say," I admitted truthfully. "I've seen a lot of notes like this. Sometimes it turns out to be nothing. But sometimes it

turns out to be . . .” I paused, hoping the time lapse would soften the word. “*Something*.”

She looked away, fearful tears stinging her eyes. Then, finally, she surrendered a heavy sigh. “My friend who referred me to you said that you do some kind of *test*.”

I LOOKED into the eyes of the man standing next to me as we clinked our glasses together and simultaneously took a sip.

“So what brings you to Denver?” I asked, biting my lower lip. The lip-biting technique works brilliantly to suggest that my confidence level is *just* enough to ask the question but not enough to keep from fidgeting while I do it.

Because, despite appearances, I actually knew more about this man than I was letting on. More than he would ever care for me to know. And certainly more than just any other woman in a hotel bar.

For instance, I knew that this particular man liked confidence but not too much. Because with too much, he has no sense of conquest. It comes too easily. If *she* is just a little bit shy, it’s more of a challenge. He likes when women make the first move, but only to show an initial interest, then he likes to take over.

I see a lot of men like him.

“My company is acquiring a smaller venture that’s headquartered here,” he explained.

I nodded my head, intrigued, as if nothing in the world could be more interesting. “And what company would that be?”

The man raised up a finger, motioning for me to wait, and then reached into his jacket pocket and removed a business card. He placed it on the bar in front of me as if to say, *Why waste precious words when the card already says it all?*

I slid the card closer to me and tilted my head to the side as I read aloud with genuine curiosity, as if I were reading the name for the first time: “Kelen Industries.”

Then I looked up at him as my expression changed from one of innocent intrigue to one of vague recognition.

“Wait a minute,” I said, taking a second look at the card and tapping my finger on it. “I know this company.” I paused and pretended to think long and hard, digging way back into my memory.

The man chuckled almost condescendingly. "I highly doubt it. We manufacture—"

"Car engines!" I interrupted with the enthusiasm of a celebrity groupie.

He shot me a look of astonishment. "That's right."

"You guys just released that new 10-cylinder, 5.2-liter engine to compete with the Japanese S8."

He blinked in disbelief and then looked at me with such longing that he could have devoured me right then and there.

"How does a girl like *you,*" he began, giving me another once-over, making sure he didn't accidentally miss a pair of nerdy, taped-up glasses in my breast pocket or a graphing calculator sticking out of my handbag, "know about car engines?"

I blushed, as if he had just found my hidden weak spot. A shameful secret that I kept locked inside, but upon meeting someone of his status could no longer bear to keep concealed. "Just a hobby," I said bashfully.

He smiled and quickly added, "I'm sitting in that booth right over there. Would you like to join me?"

The invite was fast. About as fast as I had calculated. He was an easy code to break; I didn't think I'd have to work at this one. This man was an obvious pro. I definitely wasn't the first woman he'd ever invited to sit down. But luckily, I'm not the jealous type.

It's my job to sit down.

The invite is always necessary, no matter how fast or slow it comes. It's obligatory. I can't invite, I can only accept. It's one of the rules. And since I, myself, invented the rules, it would be silly to break one. For me rules aren't made to be broken. They were made for a reason, and it was usually a pretty good one.

"Well . . ." I hesitated, looking at my watch.

"Just for a little bit," he said persuasively, with an engaging smile.

I considered for a moment. Just long enough to give him the rush of a possible rejection and, as a result, the subsequent rush of a tiny first victory. Men like him live for that victory rush. It's something they don't get at home anymore. And in all honesty, judging by the size of his bank account, something he doesn't get away from home either. A man this rich is rarely turned down. And he knew that.

But the one thing that differentiated me from all the other girls was that I didn't want anything from him in return. I was just there to observe. And, of course, take good notes.

Subconsciously, he wanted the chase. He also wanted the triumph at the end, but working for it made it so much more fun. That's why tonight I had to be somewhat demure. Unsure if I had the time, or the desire, to share a drink with somebody. I couldn't be the type of girl who just sits down with any stranger she meets in a bar. His offer had to seem somehow . . . more intriguing than most.

But then again, that girl is only a design. A fabrication of his perfect woman.

"I guess that would be all right," I said at last.

He smiled and chivalrously picked up both of our glasses, and we walked the few paces back to his plush, red velvet booth, which looked like it could fit five people, six if they liked one another. He waited for me to slide in and then placed my drink down on the table before taking the seat next to me.

"So, where are you from?" he asked, sipping his drink.

"L.A.," I stated matter-of-factly, playfully running my fingers up and down the sides of my glass. "And you?"

It was here in the process that I chose to reach down and adjust the strap on my Manolos . . . while he was digesting my question. Not that it was a difficult question, but at this point there's less and less blood flowing to the brain. So the questions become more difficult. Even the simple ones like these.

But the shoe-strap adjustment is never *just* an adjustment. It's a leisurely slide down the leg, making sure to touch upon all erogenous zones, and a deliberate diversion of my attention. The diversion is always long enough for them, if they so choose, to remove the wedding ring.

And he did.

When I came back up and casually glanced at his left hand out of the corner of my eye, it was gone.

"Orange County," he said, not missing a beat. "Looks like we're neighbors. I have a house in Newport." His casual response said nothing about the fact that he was now minus one very important piece of jewelry. As if the removal of his wedding ring didn't faze him at all. Just as someone would take off their watch at the end of

the day, this man evidently takes off his wedding ring when he meets girls in bars.

I smiled delightfully. "Oh, I love it down there! The beaches are amazing. My best friend lives right next door, in Huntington."

"Well then, you'll have to come south for a visit," he offered suggestively. "I have a great pool overlooking the ocean."

I released a perfectly timed nervous giggle. The kind that lets someone know they're making you uncomfortable, but at the same time implies you don't really mind all that much.

"Maybe I will," I replied softly.

Nevertheless, the one thing we *both* knew was that no matter what happened in the next few hours, I wouldn't be making any trips down to Newport Beach in the near future. However, my understanding of that unspoken agreement was just a bit more informed than his.

"IT'S CALLED a fidelity inspection," I had gently explained to the woman sitting across from me with tears in the corners of her eyes. "And how it works is: You and I will decide on a location where your husband will be in the near future. Preferably somewhere out of town. My research has shown that most infidelity in men happens away from home. I will then travel to that predetermined location and present myself as an 'opportunity.' "

She nodded slowly, taking it all in. One painful detail at a time.

"I will not instigate anything. I will only follow your husband's lead."

"And then what?" she asked, desperately wanting me to come with all the answers neatly wrapped up in a pretty little package. A marriage repair kit in a box. Unfortunately, it didn't quite work that way. With infidelity, there is never a quick fix. But there *is* a solution. And that's why I was there.

"Mrs. Jacobs," I began kindly, "I only offer information. What you choose to do with it afterward is entirely up to you."

She nodded and tried to smile.

The piece of paper in my hand was the first clue. There's always a clue. The question is what you choose to do with it. Will you ignore it and continue living your life, always doubting, always wondering? Or will you do something about it?

This particular clue came in the form of a name and a series of numbers. "Alexis" was spelled out on the page in unmistakably female handwriting, and then underneath was a phone number, followed by the text, "Bathing suit optional!"

Although I didn't want to admit it to the woman sitting across from me, it looked exactly like what I suspected it to be. My friends give out their numbers to guys all the time. And that's what they write. A name and a number. And then sometimes a funny private joke. Something to remind him of the conversation they had had earlier in the evening.

"And you're positive your husband doesn't know anyone by the name of Alexis?" I asked earnestly.

She shook her head. "Not that I know of. Our friends' daughter's name is Alexis, but she's only ten. I doubt she would have written that."

I nodded in agreement and offered a heartwarming smile. "Yes, I doubt it, too." She fidgeted nervously in her seat. She had hoped it wouldn't come to this. She looked down at her lap. Her hands were locked tightly together, and she began to knead them like a loaf of bread.

We sat in silence for a moment, until she finally lifted her head and looked me straight in the eyes. "If you were me, what would you do?" she asked softly.

I looked at her with compassion, ready and willing to help in any way I could. "I would want peace of mind," I said in all honesty.

"WHAT'S YOUR name, by the way?" the man in the bar asked me.

"Ashlyn," I answered as I turned toward him and extended my hand.

Of course, it's a code name. I never use my real name. "Ashlyn" doesn't actually exist. She's a hologram. A character in a play. A play I've performed hundreds of times, in a hundred different hotel bars. And yet, they all seem strangely familiar. The same show, over and over again for the past two years.

"What a beautiful name," he remarked, becoming visibly more comfortable in the booth.

I thanked him kindly. It wasn't the first time I'd heard it. Yes, it was a beautiful name. That's, after all, why I chose it. Because if

you're going to fight for a cause, you need a good alias to fight under.

"Nice to meet you, Ashlyn. I'm Raymond."

But I already knew his name. That's one of the basics. In fact, I knew a lot more about the man sitting next to me than what was written on his little white business card.

Raymond Jacobs. CEO of Kelen Industries, the second-largest manufacturer of automobile engines in North America. Just shy of thirty-eight years old, he lives in Newport Beach, California, with his wife, Anne, and their three children. His hobbies include sailing, golf, downhill skiing, and wine tasting, although he hardly gets to do any of them because of his hectic work schedule. He likes sushi, but only if it's expensive, the blue fin tuna stuff (he's suspicious of cheap, uncooked fish). He watches hockey and basketball whenever a Texas team is playing, because that's where he grew up. He graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in engineering, a college sweetheart who he proposed to a year later, and a lifetime allegiance to the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity.

I always do my research. It makes my job much easier.

"Yes, I know," I said with a faint smile that left my mouth half open so he could see my tongue playfully massaging the back of my teeth.

As soon as he began to stare, however, I quickly shut it and pressed my lips together tightly. Because tonight, with Raymond Jacobs, CEO of Kelen Industries, I am embarrassed at being caught doing anything overly sexual. Especially when people are watching. I practice the tongue-against-the-teeth maneuver in front of the mirror at least twice a week . . . when no one else is around. But when it comes time to actually use it on someone, I am slightly less courageous.

"Raymond Jacobs." I pronounced his name fully and with importance.

"How do you know that?" he asked, suddenly paranoid, as he remembers that he hasn't yet told me his full name.

I coyly pointed to his business card in my hand.

"Right." He laughed at himself, seemingly relieved. Because for the *very* slightest moment, there was just a small flash of panic that I might not be exactly who I say I am.